

Panel studying suggestion to close Irwin School

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The possibility of closing the 61-year old Irwin School in De Pere has resurfaced, this time as a recommendation in a state-assisted study.

The School Board at its Oct. 17 meeting referred that recommendation to its administrative team along with the question, "What would happen to the children there if the school is closed?"

District Administrator Richard Yenchesky is expected to report the team's findings to the board Nov. 21.

It is not the first time that closing Irwin School has been recommended. A citizens

committee studied that possibility in 1984 but opted to leave the school at 428 N. Superior St. open.

The facility's future also was studied in 1972 and 1982, and the same shortcomings emerged — poor design, bad acoustics, lack of ventilation and need for window insulation.

A major concern of the board is what will happen to the 116 children currently enrolled there. If the students are moved to Dickinson School, Yenchesky said, a grade would have to be moved out of Dickinson, which houses kindergarten through grade 5.

Closing Irwin School was one of nine recommendations in a 51-page study done with the help of state Department of Public In-

struction consultants.

School Board member M. Fran Growt said the study was one way to look at the long-range financial needs of the district and analyze costs, business and personnel management, indebtedness and manpower needs.

"We decided to go with it (the study) after the financial crisis arose," Growt said. "I thought their suggestions were excellent."

What Growt described as a "hideous financial crush" came in 1982-83, when the tax levy went up \$839,000 and residents were slapped with a 33 percent increase in their property taxes.

The study made a number of suggestions for cost reductions, starting with a decrease

in the annual \$3,919 cost per student, which is higher than other Bay Conference schools and affects the amount of state aids received.

Reducing the district's debt retirement would help decrease that figure.

The DPI study recommended restructuring the school district's organization to grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12, which would permit Irwin to be closed.

Dickinson currently houses grades kindergarten through 5; the middle school, grades 6-8; and the high school, 9-12.

All the schools are operating under capacity.

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□ Irwin

Recommendations of the study were referred to citizen committees, which reported their findings at the September board meeting.

The Long-range Planning Committee supported the K-5, 6-8, and 9-12 structure and said it preferred that no building be closed.

But if Irwin has to be closed, all K-5 students should attend Dickinson, the committee said.

Irwin School lacks adequate library, cafeteria and gym facilities and is in need of major repairs.

Yenchesky cited resurfacing the playground area, replacing windows with insulated panels, carpeting to help acoustics, more electrical outlets, boiler repairs and chimney tuckpointing for starters. He did not have an estimate of the cost involved.

Many of the recommendations in the DPI report already have been implemented.

A \$260,000 savings was realized this year when 8.85 teaching positions were reduced. Teacher-pupil ratios subsequently went up to 1-to-14.6 this year with a goal of 1-to-15.4 in 1985-86. Class sizes were set at a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 27, depending on the nature of the class.

Twenty-one courses were dropped at the high school because of low enrollment.

"The board has and continues to be committed to providing a quality program, but they are supersensitive to the financial plight of our taxpayers," Yenchesky said.

A recommendation to upgrade or replace the middle school is currently being considered.

The citizen committee that studied the facility formed a lengthy list of improvements needed and estimated the replacement cost would be roughly \$5.7 million.

The first section of the school — originally a high school — was built in 1929.

Although the study recommended that the Cook Street and Nicolet Airport properties be retained for future trades, board member John Hendricks recommended that the Cook Street site be sold "to the highest bidder."

The 11-acre site is used as a park by the city.

"I don't think that property will ever be used for a school — it's not big enough for a school," Hendricks said.

He said money from the sale of the land could be used to reduce property taxes, for improvements at the middle school or to fix up Irwin if the school remains open.

"Right now we're at rock bottom. We can't pinch another penny without going into the curriculum," he said.

A recommendation to refinance the long-term debt of \$3.5 million for the high school is being considered by the Finance Committee. Due to a restricted recall provision in the Milwaukee Western Bank loan, the debt cannot be refinanced until Nov. 1, 1986.

The district is expected to be free this year of a \$270,000 deficit that has been paid off at \$90,000 annually.

The board also is looking at the feasibility of merging with the West De Pere School District. The DPI will meet with school and municipal officials Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at De Pere High School.